



c/o FIAB 60 Rue Washington  
B 1050 Bruxelles  
Belgium

Registration Number : 50813891737-43

## CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE "EU 2020" STRATEGY

### Some reflections from the Global Alliance of Mental Illness Advocacy Networks

On behalf of the **Global Alliance of Mental Illness Advocacy Networks** (GAMIAN-Europe), we would like to express our appreciation of the Commission's initiative to ensure appropriate and effective follow up of the Lisbon Strategy by developing a new 'EU2020' strategy.

GAMIAN-Europe is the voice of patients affected by mental health problems in Europe. Established in 1998 as a representative coalition of patient organisations, GAMIAN-Europe advocates the interests of patients and aims to put the patient at the centre of all issues of the EU healthcare debate. We are seeking to become a powerful and trusted point of reference for the EU institutions and other organisations and stakeholders seeking the views of patients. This is why we particularly welcome the consultation on EU2020, which shows the Commission's intention to engage with EU citizens and their representative organizations.

The EU 2020 consultation document sets a useful framework for a new EU social and economic vision, in which 'growth' seems to be the key notion. Three main drivers for change towards achieving a sustainable, green and social market economy are being listed:

- Creating value by basing growth on knowledge
- Empowering people in inclusive societies
- Creating a competitive, connected and greener economy.

Furthermore, the document refers to the current economic crisis and its profound impact on economies.

While all of this is highly relevant, GAMIAN-Europe would like to point out a number of issues that are lacking.

First of all, the issues and actions listed under the second driver, 'empowering people in inclusive societies', focus on the acquisition of new skills, fostering creativity and innovation, the development of entrepreneurship and a smooth transition between jobs'. In other words, the focus is on the world of work only.

Apart from this approach being one-sided, it also creates the impression that 'work' is an isolated phenomenon, which is only being affected by (lack, presence or development of) skills. GAMIAN-Europe would like to underline the important influence of (mental) health in the broadest sense on the individual's ability to work. Currently, every fourth adult in the EU is affected by mental illness costing the EU up to 4% of GDP in lost productivity. For example, depression is forecast to be the major cause of illness, leading to absenteeism and productivity loss. If the labour market is to become more dynamic, flexible and effective, a healthy workforce would seem to be a precondition. It goes without saying that there is no

health without mental health –and this is a notion the Commission itself also subscribes to, underlined by the EU Mental Health Pact and its specific themes. Mental health is a precondition for productive citizens and active measures to ensure citizens enjoying good mental health will be needed. Mental health in the work place has been incorporated as one of the main themes of the European Mental Health Pact – another illustration of the importance the Commission attaches to this issue.

Europe needs to help build a society which caters for citizens that are resilient and better able to deal constructively with life's challenges

A second issue, related to the first, is the number of references to the economic downturn and its impact on economies (rather than on economies and individuals). Fortunately, some small signs of economic recovery are slowly starting to emerge. However, the end of the profound impact of the crisis on individuals, due to loss of employment, job insecurity, loss of income and repossession, potentially resulting in problems of mental health, exclusion and poverty is by no means near.

A recent study, carried out by the London School of Economics, the UK Royal College of Psychiatrists and the NHS Confederation's Mental Health Network<sup>1</sup> has found that the demand for mental health services has increased over the past 12 months as people struggle to cope with unemployment, debt, home repossession and threat of redundancy. The report says that 'the psychological impact of the recession is heaping pressure on health services at a time when public spending is being cut....The tension between the need to curb public spending and respond to rising demand for services is likely to become ever more of an issue as governments struggle to balance budgets in the wake of the financial crisis'. The authors also call on governments to provide support for employers to keep people with mental health problems in work.

In line with the findings of this study, GAMIAN-Europe upholds that the future strategy should take account of the psychological effects of the crisis, and ensure support and assistance for those individuals that need it. In this respect, we were happy to note Commissioner Vassiliou's recent call on Member States not to curb health spending. Moreover, the Commission's explicit recognition of the importance of mental health, notably by means of the European Mental Health Pact, is providing support for our activities (both in terms of advocacy as well as in terms of raising awareness) and will help future policy guidelines. For instance, the Pact's strand on mental health in the workplace can support many of the actions listed in the EU2020 document.

In conclusion, we would again like to urge the Commission not to forget about the crucial importance of health in the widest sense if the future strategy is to bear any fruit. The quality of life and prosperity of individuals should be the ultimate measure for the success of the strategy, and prevention of illness and health promotion – also in terms of mental health – should be included in the basic framework of EU2020.

**The EU2020 vision and strategy should take explicit account of (mental) health issues if it is to deliver on its objectives.**

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/PSSRU/pdf/mental\\_health\\_downturn121109.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/PSSRU/pdf/mental_health_downturn121109.pdf)